

# Blinding Polyphemus in the *Aeneid*

Sarah Armstrong

Homer's Cyclops is not a character we feel much sympathy for. His story is to be found in book 9 of the *Odyssey*, where Homer makes it plain that, as a scorner of the gods and a violator of the sacred code of guest friendship, Polyphemus gets exactly what he deserves. The hero Odysseus shows his famous versatility and wit in escaping from the lair of the flesh-eating monster, and makes off with a good portion of the Cyclops' sheep into the bargain.

When Virgil uses a story from Homer in his own epic poem, the *Aeneid*, it is always worth taking a closer look. Aeneas' encounter with the Cyclops comes towards the end of the 'mini-*Odyssey*' in book 3 and, as in Homer, the tale is part of a flashback sequence as the hero recounts his adventures to his hosts. Virgil's original audience would have been familiar with Homer's Cyclops story, and they must have been struck forcibly by the change of viewpoint and emphasis in this new version.

## A man of many wiles

The first and most obvious thing to notice is that, in the *Aeneid*, the dashing hero of the *Odyssey* is on the side of the baddies, not the goodies! In fact Odysseus, or Ulysses, to give him his Latin name, is characterized as the arch-villain of the Greek army. The resourcefulness and eloquence which in Homer's epic are his distinguishing virtues are now seen from the Trojan point of view: 'Do you imagine that any gifts from the Greeks are free from treachery? Is this what you know of Ulysses?' asks Laocoön in book 2.

And the deceitful Sinon has no difficulty in winning the Trojans' trust – he has only to present himself as 'the victim of the jealousy of Ulysses and his smooth tongue' and they are instantly on his side and prepared to believe anything he tells them. Homer's 'much-enduring, godlike Odysseus' has become *scelerum inventor*, 'the inventor of crimes', and *dirus Ulixes*, 'Ulysses the terrible'.

## Leave no man behind

In Homer, Odysseus begins his account by describing the land of the Cyclopes and the nature of its inhabitants, so that we are prepared for the monster when he eventually appears. Virgil, however, makes Aeneas introduce the story in a different way:

*Suddenly we saw a strange sight coming out of the woods. It was a man we did not know, in pitiable plight and half-dead with hunger, coming towards us on the shore with his hands stretched out in supplication. We stared at him. The filth on his body was indescribable. He had a straggling beard and the rags he wore were pinned together by thorns, but for all that he was a Greek, one of those who had been sent to Troy bearing the arms of his country.*

(3.590–95, David West's translation)

Virgil places the word for 'we stared', *respicimus*, at the beginning of a line, with an emphatic break after it, which conveys to perfection the amazement of the Trojans. They are stopped dead in their tracks by the very last thing they expected to see: a man

like themselves, in a state of direst need, but also, it quickly dawns on them, that most hated thing, a Greek. Their consternation grows as the man proceeds to throw himself on their mercy:

*'I beg you, Trojans... take me aboard your ships. Take me anywhere... If I am to die, I shall be pleased to die at the hands of men.'*

The Trojans have as yet no idea what the man is so afraid of, but if he is prepared to throw himself on the mercy of the enemy, it must be something pretty bad. In this way Virgil creates a powerful atmosphere of tension and foreboding: far more effective than a scary monster we know about is the monster we can as yet only imagine.

Once they have got over their initial shock, the Trojans respond by bombarding the stranger with questions. The young man identifies himself as Achaemenides, and says that he was left behind when Ulysses and his companions made their escape from the Cyclops' cave.

There is nothing in Homer about anyone being left behind; obviously, Virgil has had to introduce the figure of Achaemenides so that he can provide an account of what went on in the cave. At first glance, 'I'm here because Ulysses went without me' seems like rather a lame excuse for his presence, but Virgil, as always, makes a virtue out of necessity, blackening still further the character of Ulysses, who ran away in a panic and left one of his companions to suffer alone.

Having reminded us what a complete rotter Ulysses is, Achaemenides finally launches into the familiar story of what went on in the cave, and after waiting for so long we are not disappointed: the blood-spattered lair, the twitching limbs and vomited gobbets of human flesh are magnificently described in all their gory detail. What stands out as being unusual is the emphasis placed on Polyphemus' eye:

*'Then, taking a sharp weapon we drilled the one huge eye that lay, like an Argive shield or the lamp of Apollo's sun, deep set in that dreadful forehead.'* (3.635–7)

As large as a Homeric man-covering shield and as bright as the sun god's light: an extraordinary description, highlighting the single eye of the Cyclops not just as his essential characteristic, but as something wonderful and awe-inspiring.

## The light of life

The blinding of Polyphemus and the escape of Odysseus and his men forms the climax of Homer's narrative; Virgil's story, however, has not yet got there. Aeneas has been describing events as they unfolded from the Trojans' point of view: first, the appearance of Achaemenides and their reaction to it; second, Achaemenides' story, an eyewitness account but, we should note, essentially a second-hand experience. The true climax comes when Polyphemus appears on the scene in person, and the Trojans finally see him for themselves:

*Scarcely had he finished speaking when we saw the shepherd Polyphemus himself high up on the mountain among*

*his sheep, heaving his vast bulk down towards the shore he knew so well. He was a terrifying sight, huge, hideous, blinded in his one eye and using the trunk of a pine tree to guide his hand and give him a firm footing. His woolly sheep were coming with him. They were the only pleasure he had left, his sole consolation in distress. (3.655–61)*

Here, then, is Virgil's Polyphemus, a ruined, suffering creature, and another victim of the ruthless Ulysses. One line of the Latin text is particularly effective, as the triple elision – *monstr(um) horrend(um) inform(e) ingens* – produces a string of long syllables, creating a vivid picture in sound of the Cyclops' slow, halting gait as he gropes about in the dark. The end of the next line, translated literally, means 'whose light had been stolen away'. The word *lumen*, meaning light or lamp, is regularly used to refer to the eye, but here its other meanings, 'the light of day' and even 'the light of life', are brought poignantly to mind. We are reminded, too, of the previous reference to that *lumen*, when it shone out in all its hugeness and glory. Without his eye, Polyphemus is as good as destroyed. Our sympathy for him is further aroused as he wades out into the sea and bathes his bleeding eye socket, 'grinding his teeth and moaning'.

### Sympathy for the devil

Can there be anything but a sense of anti-climax after so powerful a scene? Read it for yourself and see what you think. This writer at least believes that Virgil does not let us down. First there is Polyphemus' mighty yell of impotent fury as he senses the ships sailing away, then Aeneas' parting glimpse of the other Cyclopes as they appear all over the mountainside and stand, 'each with his one eye glaring and head held high in the sky, a fearsome gathering, standing like high-topped mountain oaks or cone-bearing cypresses in Jupiter's soaring forest or the grove of Diana'.

By leaving us with a sense of Polyphemus as victim, and of the Cyclopean race as something majestic and awe-inspiring, rather than sub-human and uncivilized, Virgil adds a new dimension to Homer's famous story, and reminds us of the *lacrimae rerum*, the 'tears for suffering', which are an inescapable part of the human experience, and one of the most powerful and enduring themes of the *Aeneid*.

*Sarah Armstrong lives in Sheffield, where she teaches Latin (and Greek where required) to a variety of people of all ages, currently ranging from 10 to 90.*